Silas Soule and the Courage to Stand Against the Tide of Injustice

On the night of April 23, 1865, eight days after President Abraham Lincoln met his end in the Ford Theater, a young man named Silas Soule, a Civil War and Indian Wars veteran and a constable in a frontier town called Denver, Colorado, ran into two cavalrymen, late, who, presumably drunk, were shooting their handguns irresponsibly. No one knows what was said, but in a matter of minutes, Charles Squier, a ne'er-do-well with a rap sheet and a venomous hatred for Abraham Lincoln, shot Silas Soule in the head. Soule died almost instantly.

So ends the short, eventful life of Silas Soule, who had on April Fools Day, just three weeks before, married his 18-year-old sweetheart named Hersa Coberly. Soule was just 26 years old. A very, very sad death.

Every Thanksgiving, Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho kids take part in a commemoration of the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, when Native men, women, and children were killed, slaughtered by a regiment of 650 Colorado troops, who were themselves incensed by bloody acts perpetrated by Native people in eastern Colorado. To white people, those attacks kept Denver and Colorado from growing, business from thriving.

To Native folks, those attacks came in retribution for the way their land was simply bulldozed away. It's an old story. The Arapahos and Northern Cheyenne want to remember, so every Thanksgiving a whole number of them run from way out east in Colorado, to Denver for what they call “spiritual healing.” They want to remember. Most white folks would rather forget.

The leader of the Colorado First was Colonel John Chivington, a powerful man and military hero nicknamed "The Fighting Parson.” It’s not an exaggeration to say he thought Native people vermin. He said so. "The

fighting parson" was a preacher of the Word, a Sunday school teacher--roles white folks would also rather forget.

The Sand Creek Massacre Spiritual Healing Run/Walk was created to remember the deaths of their ancestors at Sand Creek, as well as to honor Silas Soule, who was among the officers riding along with Chivington on November 29, 1864, but he commanded his troops not to shoot because he knew what would happen would be not a fight but a massacre.

In the 1850s, Soule, like his father, was a determined abolitionist of the John Brown school, a freedom fighter who, as a teenager ushered runaway slaves up and into the Underground Railroad because he saw human slavery as a cancer that had to be cut out of humankind.

Soule was neither angel nor saint, but he refused to participate at Sand Creek, then made public his shame at what had happened by accusing Chivington of inhuman slaughter. Some people believe that, in 1865, when Charles Squier shot Silas Soule through the head, it was in retaliation for Soule's accusations against the horrors of Sand Creek. To frontier Denver, Colonel Chivington was an authentic American hero. Did Soule's untimely death result from his accusations against Chivington and Colorado Cavalry? It's unlikely anyone will ever know.

How it is that some men and women are capable of running against the tide when they determine that there is higher moral ground is an almost unanswerable question. Why did Silas Soule command his troops not to fight? What was it in his character that led him to tell his troops he'd shoot them if they used their carbines at all?

What makes some good people rescue Jews in the face of Nazi terror? Just exactly what went on in Soule's soul to prompt him to disobey his commander's massacre is a mystery we'll never divine.

What we do know is that he did, and that his decision is what those Arapaho kids want us all to remember when they run from the banks of Sand Creek to downtown Denver every year at Thanksgiving.

You've got to go a lot of miles on gravel to get to Sand Creek today. All those stones could do some wholesome damage. But there are a few who go, and some of them run all the way to Denver to remember, which is to say, not to forget.